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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 003042

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SUBJECT: DAMASCUS DECLARATION AIMS TO REVITALIZE EFFORTS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)
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11. (C) SUMMARY: The Damascus Declaration group will assemble June 26 for a crucial meeting, aimed at creating a more clearly defined, structured organization and moving away from being a coalition of individuals, according to key opposition activist Riad Seif. Should the group succeed, Seif predicts that the group's focus will shift to conducting more activities aimed at engaging the general population. This decision coincides with reports that President Bashar al-Asad himself has made disassembling the Declaration group a top priority, with the most recent efforts concentrated on splitting the Kurdish signatory parties from the rest of the group. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) CRUCIAL MEETING JUNE 26 TO DEFINE STRUCTURES AND GAIN MOMENTUM: Key opposition activist Riad Seif told CDA on June 22 that the Damascus Declaration (DD) group will meet at his home on June 26 to make crucial decisions on its future. Seif noted that the meeting's goal is to strengthen the organization by defining clear structures, voting processes, and committees empowered to speak on specific issues on behalf of the entire group. Seif explained that such structures are necessary in order to "activate" the group, better balance power within the organization, and end the extra level of influence currently enjoyed by certain individual members: "Hassan Abdulazeem would only be one of 15 votes," he said. Seif added that Abdulazeem's Democratic Arab Socialist Union is the "weak link" in the DD and that much internal debate exists within the party whether to continue membership in the DD. (COMMENT: According to post contacts, shortly after the Declaration's release in mid-October 2005, Abdulazeem designated himself the DD spokesman, a role which other members have grudgingly accepted as a fait accompli. Abdulazeem's hesitation to act either proactively or in response to the recent SARG crackdown is also often named by other civil society activists as the source of the DD's relative inaction over the last four months.)

13. (C) FOCUS WILL SHIFT TO CONDUCTING ACTIVITIES, GAINING POPULAR SUPPORT: The DD should not depend so heavily on individuals, and a more structured organization would create the mechanisms that would allow it to continue, even if individual members are jailed by the SARG or choose to leave the group. Furthermore, more autonomous committee structures would allow group members to comment on events without having to first seek permission from the entire group. Seif was cautiously optimistic about the chances for success, noting that "if we survive Monday, we will have a strong internal (opposition) grouping." Within this new framework, Seif expects the group to conduct more activities and to shift its

focus from the intellectual class to the masses and to seek popular support. (NOTE: Seif added that the DD is now his "main work," hinting that his plans to start a political party remain on hold.)

¶4. (C) SARG'S NEW PUSH TO DISMANTLE THE DECLARATION GROUP: This new push for strengthening the group coincides with rumors that the SARG, and specifically President Bashar al-Asad, have made dismantling the Damascus Declaration a top priority, attempting to do so by creating divisions among its members. In separate accounts, Seif and activist Rezan Zeitunah, a close associate of DD signatory Riad at-Turk, told CDA and Poloff that during a meeting with representatives from an official opposition party, the Syria Communist Party, Asad stated that the DD group was the root cause of the Damascus-Beirut Declaration and that the SARG would be taking measures to disassemble the DD group. A Kurdish member of the Communist Party volunteered to assist the SARG by convincing the leadership of the Kurdish DD signatory parties to leave the Declaration. Vice President Najah al-Attar then held a meeting June 18 with leaders of three Kurdish DD signatory parties; according to Seif, Attar raised the issue of granting citizenship to Syria's estimated 300,000 stateless Kurds. According to press reports, more such meetings are planned. In Seif's view, if the DD group does succeed on June 26 in gaining new momentum in its work, he expects the SARG to continue its efforts to pressure members to leave the coalition.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: The attempt to repair the Damascus Declaration comes after several months of criticism within civil society about the group's perceived inertia and unwillingness to react quickly to internal events, including against the sustained SARG crackdown, which culminated in the arrest of one of its founding members, Michel Kilo. While

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tackling the clear weaknesses of the Declaration (particularly its lack of reaction to current events as well as Abdulazeem's disproportionate influence) may help the group regain some credibility, its chances of regaining momentum after sitting on the sidelines for nearly five months remains to be seen.
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